Jamese S. McConico

Narrative Analysis of Ain’t I a Woman

Regent University
Abstract

Most famous for her *Ain’t I a Woman* speech, Sojourner Truth spent much of her life traveling the country to incite change and raise awareness. Her primary mission involved gender equality for women and racial equality for African Americans. Though not all agreed with her message, her colorful language and relatable subject matter commanded the attention of those she encountered and served as a means to enlighten the masses. While not everyone was swayed by Truth’s narrative, this powerful oratory left an impression upon the audiences she spoke to and at the very least, made audiences think about and/or reconsider the vast disparities women and people of color faced.
Background

Born into slavery to Dutch farmer Colonel Johannes Hardenbergh, Sojourner Truth entered the world under the name of Isabella Baumfree in Swartekill, New York. During that time the birth of slaves went unrecorded, thus leaving historians to estimate the year of her birth around 1787. Fluent in Dutch, by age nine Isabella, along with a flock of sheep was sold for $100. “Although she was a diligent worker, she was beaten for her inability to communicate with her [new] owners, the Neelys” (McLeod, 2013, p. 2). Over the next two years, Isabella was sold two more times. “Finally coming to reside on the property of John Dumont, it was during these years that Truth learned to speak English for the first time” (Sojourner Truth Biography, n.d, p. 2).

Eventually escaping from slavery in 1826, Isabella found work as a housekeeper and gradually a “religious conversion followed, as did the beginning of her life as Sojourner Truth” (McLeod, 2013, p. 3). Her son Peter took a job on a whaling ship. “She received three letters from him between 1840 and 1841. When the ship returned to port in 1842, Peter was not on board” (Sojourner Truth Biography, n.d, p. 3). He was never heard from again. Assuming Peter was dead, Isabella was stricken with grief over the loss of her last known surviving child and fell into a depression. “Emerging from the profound grief over the death of her son, Isabella felt a renewed summons to spread God’s word as an itinerant preacher. She changed her name to Sojourner Truth…and ventured out on her evangelical odyssey” (Gilbert, 1997, p. iv). Citing a conversation with God and another unnamed person, she claimed God Himself had now given her the name of “Sojourner” because she was to be a traveler and “Truth” because that was what she was to spread throughout the land (McLeod, 2013, p. 3).
A bilingual Truth could neither read nor write, but she was an unmatched storyteller (Clift, 2003, p. 58). Her primary focus was fighting for the abolition of slavery and equality of women’s rights. Most famous for her narrative *Ain’t I a Woman*, her greatest oratorical triumph occurred at a Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio on May 29, 1851 (Gilbert, 1997, p. v).

**Introduction**

Renowned for her *Ain’t I a Woman* speech, Sojourner Truth’s narrative is still used as a teaching tool in high school and college classrooms throughout the country today. The speech is included regularly in anthologies of women’s literature, anthologies of women’s rhetoric, and textbooks on history and women’s studies throughout all levels of curriculum (Siebler, 2010, p. 511). I will provide a thorough analysis of this 163 year old artifact using the rhetorical method of narrative criticism.

Today there is a standard version of *Ain’t I a Woman* society is most familiar with, however, prior to this adopted version of the narrative, the first reports of the speech were published by the *New York Tribune* on June 6, 1851, and by *The Liberator* five days later on June 11. Both of these accounts were brief, lacking a full transcription (Fitch, 1997, p. 18). The first complete transcription was published June 21, 1851 in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* by Marius Robinson, an abolitionist and newspaper editor who acted as the convention’s recording secretary (Brezina, 2005, p. 32). Twelve years later in May 1863, Frances Gage published a very different version (Craig, 2002, p. 7). Gage’s version of *Ain’t I a Woman* is now the historic standard and includes repetition of the phrase, “And ain’t I a woman?” throughout the narrative. It also includes Southern dialect and accent, which is questionable, as Truth was born in the eastern region of Ulster County, New York and didn’t learn English until the age of nine. Before that, Truth only spoke Dutch.
The historical context and importance of Truth’s narrative lends itself to two separate issues, gender inequality towards women and racial inequality of African Americans. Truth, a strong advocate for both, traveled throughout the country speaking out and raising awareness for the issues. While the initial speech was given in 1851, Truth presented the narrative many more times until her death in 1883. As she continued her mission, ten years later, a separate event concerning race erupted in America. Coined by some as America’s bloodiest clash, the Civil War (1861-65) begin. Under the leadership of former President Abraham Lincoln, the Union fought against the Confederate States of America for the abolition of slavery and resulted in the death of more than 620,000. Millions more were injured (American Civil War, n.d., p. 1).

“Truth put her reputation to work during the Civil War, helping to recruit black troops for the Union Army” (Sojourner Truth Biography, n.d., p. 4). With racial tensions high in America, the South at odds with the North, and Truth speaking to such a dangerous subject matter, she could have easily been killed for being Black and a non-subservient woman, yet she felt her message was important, therefore she sojourned on.

Truth, although singular in style, was like other early Black feminists who maintained multiple political associations and negotiated the conflicting demands of competing and intersecting publics. They often produced double-voiced addresses that demanded consideration of their location and the ways in which they were represented. Remaining in our memories and imaginations for longer than any of her contemporaries, Truth has become a highly transportable symbol of Black feminist “difference” (Zackodnik, 2004, p. 49).

Truth looked to change and/or shed new light on how gender and racial inequalities are viewed and accepted by a large portion of society during that time. Using narrative criticism,
the objective is to provide a further examination of *Ain’t I a Woman* in an attempt to discover how rhetoric is used to challenge the perceptions of the aforementioned inequalities Truth fought against.

**Artifact Description**

Spoken during a women’s convention, the primary focus of Truth’s *Ain’t I a Woman* is the issue of women’s rights. As the narrative continues to unfold, the secondary inclusion of racial injustice becomes evident (Siebler, 2010, p. 511). The overall theme in Truth’s message seems to be her desire to give a voice to the voiceless. Be it those who are dismissed because they are women or those who are looked down upon because of race. The narrative lends itself to Truth’s mission to speak for all who fall into either category and may be unable or simply too afraid to speak for themselves. She vocalizes their thoughts for them, thus becoming the voice they never had.

Truth’s narrative uses a number of rhetorical devices throughout the piece. There is the use of slang, informal verbiage, dialect, metaphors, terms of endearment, and a number of others. An in-depth description of the artifact will provide continued explanation of these and other devices. However, it is important to note, as read today, her words are never really her words, merely a variation of what was transcribed and presented by Robinson and Gage (Siebler, 2010, p. 512). As the narrator, Truth opens with the line, “Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter” (Truth, 1851). Use of the term children has an ambiguous meaning. Because we know the setting was the Women’s Convention, it is safe to assume there are no children present. Yet by referencing a room full of adults as children, it indicates Truth views everyone equally and wants to send the message that there is no need for anyone to be looked down upon. “By calling the audience “children” she is delineating the fact
that they are all equal in her eyes, just as a mother loves all of her children equally despite all of their differences” (Perry, n.d., p. 5). Because the background information indicates Truth has strong ties to Christianity, it is also possible, no matter the race or gender, she believes every person in the room belongs to God, thus His children.

While it is clear Truth has been invited to speak at the convention her arrival is not embraced by all, as the racial demographic consists of white men and women. “Many of the women there contest her right to address the convention, fearing that press attention to a “nigger” would alienate public support for their cause” (Gilbert, 1997, p. v). Still, Truth continues with the speech, and describes the experience of taking the stage using the slang term “racket,” which indicates the room was noisy and perhaps even in an uproar. She then follows up with the metaphoric use of slang in the same sentence and professes, “something is out of kilter,” thereby indicating to the audience something doesn’t seem quite right. Prior to Truth taking the stage, “the little man in black” who had just spoken, exited the stage by saying “women can’t have as much rights as men ‘cause Christ wasn’t a woman.” The unnamed man’s closing comment is what prompts Truth to address the issue of women’s rights early on in the narrative.

Following the introductory sentence, she references an additional assertion made “the little man in black” that “women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere,” but continues, stating, no one has ever helped her in such a way. She questions, “and ain’t I a woman?” Essentially the unnamed man is saying chivalry is not dead and is necessary for a woman to be cared for properly, yet Truth highlights this juxtaposition between white women being cared for and the lack thereof for black women. Conversely, she uncovers the hypocrisy of his statement. Standing at more than six feet tall and built like a halfback with huge muscles from working the fields, Truth [continues by] ridiculing the argument that women are too delicate to survive outside the protection of the home and
should be shielded (Clift, 2003, p. 1). She reiterates throughout the piece she too is a woman and deserves to be treated as such.

Ultimately, she declares, “I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me!” Truth’s reference of the field allows a causal relationship to come full circle when she tells the audience it is because she has been made to work strenuously as a slave for the majority of her life that she has lost the look and femininity of a woman. She further shouts, “Look at me! Look at my arm!” One would imagine by directing to the audience to look at her arm, it is muscular and contains a level of strength typically only possessed by men. “When hecklers at another meeting shouted that she was too forceful to be a woman, she silenced them by baring her breasts” (Gilbert, 1997, p. v).

Truth’s narrative is direct and rather straight to the point, yet in her continued reiteration of gender and racial equality, she provides the audience further insight into why she feels so strongly about her cause. Parts of the narrative are organized by time order using flashes forward to the present with statements like, “Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles” and flashes back to the past like, “When I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me!” Her mention of Jesus directly connects her to those with religious backgrounds, thus allowing her to win over that portion of the audience that may have initially had apprehensions about her being there.

Truth recounts several other traumatic events from her past. The first being her further explanation of her undeniable strength, stating, “I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well.” This flashback to the past reveals there were extensive periods of time when she more than likely went without food after long hours of work and moments she was beaten so badly that she learned to endure the intensity of the beatings to the point that her tolerance level for pain increased over time. During those rare
occasions she was able to gain access to large portions of food, she was able to eat equivalent to that of a man.

During this same flashback but second event, Truth follows up with the somber revelation, “I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery.” Not only does this indicate she was pregnant for a good portion of her life, but as the children were born and began to be raised, they were taken from her. She has no idea where they are or even if they are still alive. This inclusion of motherhood allows Truth to directly relate with specific members of the audience. It may be safe to assume that any woman who has ever given birth and even those who may have had children but lost them in death have been persuaded by Truth’s candidness.

Considering Truth’s first language is Dutch, it is more plausible to believe she speaks using standard American English (SAE), however, the piece is written to allow readers to believe she uses African American English (AAE). AAE is described as “a dialect of American English characterized by pronunciations, syntactic structures, and vocabulary associated with and used by some North American black people and exhibiting a wide variety and range of forms varying in the extent to which they differ from standard English” (African American Vernacular English, n.d.). The slang use of “ain’t” rather than “aren’t” is found throughout the narrative along with other words like “’twixt,” “honey,” and “seen.” One might assume grammatical incorrectness and heavy usage of terms of endearment and informal verbiage at times allows a more poignant message to be delivered and heard more clearly. While there is a time and a place for the use of such vernacular, because Truth feels so strongly about the message she attempts to convey, she becomes comfortable. A strategic move, her level of comfort allows the audience to feel more relaxed, thereby more accepting of the message she has come to deliver.

Foss quotes Walter Benjamin’s *Illuminations* stating, “The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of
those who are listening to his tale” (*Foss, 2009, p. 309). This connection between the narrator and the audience (of men, women, mothers, and Christians) is observed when Truth struggles to find the proper verbiage and involves them by asking for assistance. She states, “Then they talk about this thing in the head; what’s this they call it? [member of audience whispers, “intellect”] That’s it, honey.” Foss further indicates the need for such interaction by saying, “The narrated world is a shared world because it is a joint achievement by the storyteller and the audience” (Foss, 2009, p. 309). Not only has Truth shared her world, but she has made it a personal experience for some by using the endearing term, “honey.” As a result, she sends the message that whether the audience chooses to accept her or not, she will make it a point to embrace each of them.

Truth concludes the narrative stating, “If the first woman God ever made (Eve) was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again!” One last time, she uses allusion to pinpoint the strength and capability of women. Her final response to the oppression of white women is that women and blacks must gain full human rights (Peterson, 1972, p. 57). Gilbert recounts Gage’s reaction to the impact of Truth’s speech as she closes the narrative,

The hecklers were utterly disarmed. She had taken us up in her strong arms and carried us safely over the slough of difficulty, turning the whole tide in our favor. I have never in my life seen anything like the magical influence that subdued the mobbish spirit of the day and turned the jibes and sneers of an excited crowd into notes of respect and admiration (Gilbert, 1997, p. vi).

It seems through her narrative, Truth is successful in her endeavors and has won the crowd over, thereby classifying this type of narrative a comedy. Foss writes, “In a comedy, the protagonist
completes a quest against an enemy and emerges victorious and enlightened” (Foss, 2009, p. 314).

While the immediate end result of Truth’s *Ain’t I a Woman* is success, her triumph can be categorized twofold. Though not seen for many years to come, the long-term success of Truth’s speech is that on January 1, 1863 President Abraham Lincoln signed into law the Emancipation Proclamation; a document designed to free all slaves and although long after her death on November 26, 1883, women were finally given the right to vote on August 26, 1920.

**Method of Criticism**

Sonja Foss, author of *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice* explains, “Narratives organize the stimuli of our experience so that we can make sense of the people, places, events, and actions of our lives” (Foss, 2009, p. 307). As with Sojourner Truth’s *Ain’t I a Woman* narrative she vividly describes past and present experiences that allow the reader to gain a clearer understanding regarding her advocacy of racial and gender equality.

Foss further states, “Narratives are found in many different kinds of artifacts. They can occur in rhetoric that is less obviously narrative—our dreams, conversations with friends, interviews, speeches, and even visual artifacts such as paintings and quilts” (Foss, 2009, p. 307). Truth’s speech, a seemingly untraditional narrative fits within the rhetoric framework by maintaining the four characteristics of narrative criticism to include (1) a comprising of at least two events, (2) organization by time order, (3) a causal or contributing relationship, and (4) a unified subject (p. 308). In keeping with these characteristics, Truth’s fight for racial and gender equality then becomes sharable, as, “The narrated world is a shared world because it is a joint achievement by the storyteller and the audience” (p. 309). This is seen throughout Truth’s speech, because the narrative either directly speaks to or in some cases alludes to an audience.
made up of men, women, mothers, and those with religious backgrounds. Truth connects to the audience by providing scenarios in which they all can relate.

Upon a narrative becoming “intersubjectively sharable” (p. 309), narrative criticism then requires a selection and analysis of an artifact followed by the identification of the narrative features. Those features should include the setting, characters, narrator, events, temporal relations, causal relations, audience, theme, and the type of narrative (p. 312-14).

Findings

Truth’s objective was to challenge the perception of the acceptance of inequality amongst women and African Americans. She sought to highlight how lack of acceptance for women and Blacks would only further create a divisive society, as women would not discontinue the fight for equality and African Americans would either be granted freedom or demand it by taking matters into own hands and freeing themselves, as she herself had done. I find Truth’s Ain’t I a Woman narrative served as a catalyst for change that would spark movements throughout the United States of America known as both the Women’s Suffrage and Civil Rights Movements. Certainly Truth had no clue such movements would exist, yet her narrative mentally awakened a room full of men and women who found themselves questioning their own logic by the narrative’s end. Truth’s speech shed light on how social change happens slowly but surely. The ill-informed do not change overnight, but before any change can happen, one must first be made aware. Truth’s narrative laid the foundation for such to occur.

Contribution

This narrative analysis of Truth’s Ain’t I a Woman is now a part of a long list of works that have added a new level of insight and understanding to what Truth’s mission was as she took the stage at the Women’s Convention that day. While the analysis offers support to already
existing works, it adds further contribution to rhetorical theory by bridging Truth’s causes during the 1800s with the success of her efforts into the 20th century. Furthermore, it provides an opportunity for an updated and continued analysis of women’s equality and racial injustice into 21st century.

Summary

Sojourner Truth was a simple woman who could not read or write, yet surprisingly, she was able to travel throughout the United States of America speaking to groups of white men and women in the name of gender and racial equality. In some instances many of them considered her message and their perceptions may have changed. Others may not have agreed with her message. Either way, her speaking ability captivated those audiences in such a way, that the commotion of her addressing a demographic she normally was deemed inferior to often subsided and soon they focused on much of the message she delivered. Certainly Truth ran the risk of crossing paths with one of those members from her audience who was so fueled with anger or resentment towards her, that her travels and messages could have easily lead to her being killed.

While there were other feminists of her time, Truth has become one of the most memorable, allowing her nearly two centuries old narrative to still provide insight into issues of the past that have taken on different faces of today. Fortunately and unfortunately, the content of her speech presents a timeless message and has the ability to continue to inform and raise awareness on the issues of gender and racial inequality in the 21st century and beyond.
References


NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF AIN’T I A WOMAN


***Below are three variations of Truth’s Ain’t I a Woman speech. The universal standard this narrative analysis is based upon is listed last.***
Speech 1

“Marius Robinson, who worked with Truth, recorded his version of the speech in the June 21, 1851, issue of the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*” (Alexander, n.d.).

I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman’s rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal. I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now. As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint, and a man a quart – why can’t she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much, – for we can’t take more than our pint’ll hold. The poor men seems to be all in confusion, and don’t know what to do. Why children, if you have woman’s rights, give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and they won’t be so much trouble. I can’t read, but I can hear. I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well, if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again. The Lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept and Lazarus came forth. And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and the woman who bore him. Man, where was your part? But the women are coming up blessed be God and a few of the men are coming up with them. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard.
Speech 2

“On May 2, 1863, twelve years after the original speech, Frances Gage published her enhanced version of Truth’s speech in the Anti-Slavery Standard” (Ain’t I A Woman, n.d.).

Wall, chilern, whar dar is so much racket dar must be somethin’ out o’ kilter. I tink dat ‘twixt de nigger of de Souf and de womin at de Norf, all talkin’ ‘bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what’s all dis here talkin’ ‘bout?

Dat man ober dar say dat womin needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to hab de best place everywhar. Nobody eber halps me into carriages, or ober mudpuddles, or gibs me any best place!

And ar’n’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! [And here she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing her tremendous muscular power] I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ar’n’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear de lash as well! And ar’n’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern, and seen ‘em mos’ all sold off the slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ar’n’t I a woman?

Den dey talks bout dis ting in de head; what dis dey call it? “Intellect,” whispered someone near. Dat’s it, honey. What’s dat got to do wid womin’s rights or nigger’s rights? If my cup won’t hold but a pint, and yourn holds a quart, wouldn’t ye be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full? And she pointed her significant finger, and sent a keen glance at the minister who had made the argument. The cheering was long and loud.

Den dat little man in black dar, he say women can’t have as much rights as men, ‘cause Christ wan’t a woman! Whar did your Christ come from? Man had nothin’ to do wid Him.” Oh, what a rebuke that was to the little man.

If de fust woman God ever made was strong enough to turn de world upside down all alone, dese women togedder [and she glanced her eye over the platform] ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now dey is asking to do it, de men better let ‘em.

Bleeed to ye for hearin’ on me, and now ole Sojourner han’t got nothin’ more to say.
Speech 3

“The Gage version of the speech was also reproduced in The Narrative of Sojourner Truth (1878) and in the book coedited with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Ida Husted Harper, History of Woman Suffrage (1881). The dialect represented in Gage’s 1863 version is less severe than in the 1878 and 1881 versions” (Siebler, 2010, pp. 513-14).

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that ‘twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what’s all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what’s this they call it? [member of audience whispers, “intellect”] That’s it, honey. What’s that got to do with women’s rights or negroes’ rights? If my cup won’t hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn’t you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can’t have as much rights as men, ‘cause Christ wasn’t a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain’t got nothing more to say.